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ABSTRACT

At a time when career counseling services are increasingly essential, they remain marginalized and under-used. This digest explores ways in which marketing counseling services in Canada can strengthen the professional identity of career counselors and increase public acceptance of this field. Many career counselors feel that marketing corrodes professional ethics. However, it may be that limiting marketing techniques is ultimately self-defeating, resulting in the profession turning inward and becoming increasingly non-competitive. With marketing, product development of services must be based on market research, and a thorough analysis of the needs and wants of the target audience is the first step. Marketing ultimately serves to ensure that a product is addressing an identified need, is clearly defined, is accessible, and helps consumers fully understand the services offered. Marketing can support career counseling services in three ways: (1) direct service delivery, in which the provider identifies who is to be served; (2) survival insurance, in which career counselors ensure their own survival; and (3) public awareness, which would increase the value of career counseling services. By marketing services to policy makers and funders, counselors could also demonstrate how career counseling benefits these policy makers. (RJM)

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by Sareena Hopkins

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Marketing Career Counseling Services

Sareena Hopkins

Overview

"A [person's] judgement cannot be better than the information on which it is based."

Arthur Hayes Sulzberger

Today's socio-economic reality has created an unprecedented demand for career counseling services. While career counselors continue to offer excellent services behind the closed doors of counseling offices, the Canadian public, including policy-makers and funders, are not aware that counseling's impact on clients' lives. Talk of the need to "sell" services and discussions of features and benefits tends to send career counselors into retreat; they typically have had no training in marketing concepts, nor are they comfortable as marketers. Yet service-providers face a unique opportunity today to reframe career counseling services as being personally, socially, and economically essential.

Basic marketing principles can assist counselors in achieving these goals. Marketing our services must begin from the "inside-out" by strengthening the professional identity of career counselors, resulting in the public's recognition of career counseling as an indispensable service. This, in turn, will translate into higher priority given to career counseling services by funders and policy-makers.

Discussion

The 1990s have brought a shift from resource-based industrialism to an information-based economy. Over the last decade, more than 90% of new jobs created in Canada have been in the service sector. By 1990, these jobs accounted for 70% of all employment nationally (CLMPC, 1990). We have seen efforts among some of those offering services to become increasingly "outcome-oriented." Marketing strategies, long-used within the private business world of free-market competition, have "invaded" the non-profit service sector. This shift has been embraced by some service providers. Many hospitals and community-based medical services, for example, have become more aggressive in using marketing strategies to raise awareness of their services in order to survive economically.

Career counseling, however, has largely resisted this trend. Many career counselors argue that marketing cor-

rodes professional ethics—that promoting services somehow diminishes counselors' quality and respectability. Marketing is seen as the "hard sell," driven solely by profit. However, it is worth taking a closer look at marketing before passing judgment. It may be that limiting the application of marketing techniques is ultimately self-defeating, resulting in the profession turning inward, becoming increasingly non-competitive, invisible, and under-funded. The ultimate risk in under-marketing is the disappearance of essential services. The perception that marketing conflicts with the goals of career counseling must be challenged. Marketing has long been characterized by the four P's: Product, Place, Price, and Promotion, all of which should be considered in a successful marketing plan (McCarthy, 1968).

Product development must be based on market research. In fact, marketing really begins with a fifth P - People. A thorough analysis of the needs and wants of the target audience is the first step in marketing. This information is then used to develop a product that is attractive and useful to the target market. Place must also be considered: in order to ensure access. Is the product accessible to the target market? Price refers not only to the financial cost of a product, but also to other related costs. These might include emotional, mental, or physical costs. They might also refer to the investment of time required, or to lost opportunity. Promotion is widely identified as the cornerstone of marketing. Promotion ensures that the target buyer is aware of the product and has accurate information about its features. Promotion also enables buyers to have information which enables them to see the benefits associated with the product. To be effective, this information must reflect the original market research, must be communicated using language that is understandable and meaningful to the buyer, and must highlight benefits which are important to the buyer.

Marketing ultimately serves to ensure that a product is addressing an identified need, is clearly defined, and is accessible. It guarantees that those who could benefit from the product receive accurate information about its features and its benefits. Seen this way, marketing can be used as a tool to support the goals of career counseling. By changing the terminology and by re-framing the way marketing is understood, we might begin to see marketing less as "selling" and more as "educating."

There are three ways in which marketing can support career counseling services:

1. *Direct Service Delivery.* The provider must identify who is to be served, know their needs, and clearly define services based on those needs. Such market research ultimately contributes to the provision of quality services. Riddle and Bezanson (1994) developed a way to assist counselors through this process. They suggest that quality service comes from a clear definition of who is being served and an understanding of their needs (people). This awareness shapes the organizational mandate and directs decisions regarding services offered (product). Issues of access must then be considered (place and price) and clients must be educated regarding the features and benefits of services (promotion).

2. *Survival Insurance.* Career counselors, alone, must ensure their own survival. Basic marketing principles apply here and, through an understanding of the needs of policy-makers and funders in terms of desired outcomes, career counselors can ensure that a communication plan includes clear messages linking services to those benefits identified. The United Kingdom has emerged as an international leader in this respect. The National Institute for Careers Education and Counseling (NICEC) and the Policy Studies Institute (PSI) have produced for the Department of Employment a series of briefing documents specifically targeted to promote career counseling as economically beneficial to policy-makers and funders. These documents clearly outline the features of career counseling – what it is and what it is not. They present evidence of the benefits of career counseling, showing that services ultimately lead to social and economic health, a maximized use of human resources, reduced market failures due to drop-out, fewer mismatched/discouraged workers, lower turnover, and institutional reform that supports an effective labor market. Ultimately, unless managers and funders have accurate information about the nature of services and an understanding of their benefits, the security of funding will remain fragile.

3. *Public Awareness.* Charles Dudley Warner once suggested that, "public opinion is as strong as the legislature, and nearly as strong as the Ten Commandments." This would suggest a third possible marketing step as career counselors move career development more into the consciousness of the general public. The application of marketing in this way is termed "social marketing." "ParticipAction" and the "Don't Drink and Drive" initiatives are examples of highly successful social marketing campaigns, which changed the way people think, what they value and how they act. As a means of promoting career development, Conger (1993) backed a social marketing campaign to foster a "Career Development Culture" in Canada. Messages about career development and

its importance to everyone over their entire life span, would be disseminated widely. He suggested that such a social marketing campaign could increase the value of career counseling services and help to equip individuals with strategies to take a more active role in their own career development. As a result, career development would become integrated in, and integral to, our school, work, and family cultures.

Conclusion

At a time when career counseling services are increasingly essential, they remain marginalized and under-used. An opportunity exists for the profession to move more into the mainstream. The application of marketing could provide the framework needed.

Marketing principles can be used to ensure that services reflect the career development needs of the population served (people), that services are clearly defined (product) and accessible (price and place), and that consumers fully understood the services offered (promotion).

By marketing services to policy-makers and funders, counselors could demonstrate how career counseling benefits policy makers, resulting in higher funding for counselors.

Wider marketing would also help the Canadian public become more aware of labor market opportunities, thus enabling all Canadians to maximize their skills and to assume greater personal control over their career futures.

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